

THE BERLIN SCENE

by Josef Ernst

It is a leisurely Saturday afternoon in May, in West Berlin.

On Breitscheidplatz, the main square in the heart of the city, two dozen German women dressed in sports suits, all in late middle age, are stepping out, moving gingerly to the beat of a Bavarian march. With their ample midribs pressing against their leotards, these members of an exercise club from Munich lift and twirl their batons toward the sky. Some 300 shoppers and passersby—senior citizens, middle-aged couples, many with their children—applaud approvingly as the group completes its routine.

Just 100 yards away, in the shadow of the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church, the multinational “Ku’damm Allstars” are stirring up a bigger ruckus with their drums and electric guitars. The group’s audience, standing in a semicircle around the band, comprises a diverse lot: some are tourists, either from elsewhere in Europe or the United States; others are natives. Some are light skinned, others dark skinned. Nearly all of them are under age 30.

Suddenly, a long-tressed, bearded, jeans-clad young German ambles through the crowd, in front of the Allstars, seemingly oblivious to the music, or to the fact that he is strolling across center stage. The band’s lead singer, a red-haired American from San Francisco, stops the music and gently seizes the trespasser. “Hey, I want everyone to take a look at this,” he says to the onlookers, who know enough English to understand him. “This is what we used to call a ‘hippie’ in America. They were once big in Haight-Ashbury. But don’t you know that this style went out in 1968?” Embarrassed, the German mutters “hands off” and walks away.

In some respects, the entire scene *is* West Berlin—that large (pop. two million), extraordinarily diverse, even bizarre city, undergoing drastic socioeconomic changes. Just as Greater Berlin is divided into East and West, so is West Berlin divided into two generations.

Many who belong to the older generation—the 42 percent of West Berliners who are 45 years of age and older—remember Adolf Hitler, the *Gestapo*, their Jewish neighbors being hauled away in the night, the Anglo-American bombing raids, the final apocalyptic Soviet assault. They remember Berlin when it was in ruins. They remember forays into the countryside to exchange prized family heirlooms for food. They also remember the stresses of the Cold War—the Berlin Blockade (1948–49), Nikita Khrushchev’s “Ultimatum” (1958), and the building of the Berlin Wall (1961). They have aging friends and relatives in the East.

But the younger generation knows only today’s divided Berlin, and

its members feel little in common with those who live *drüben*—"over there"—in drab East Berlin. Most of the young have either been born, or have arrived, in the city since the Wall was built. This generation includes ordinary office workers, ambitious government bureaucrats, thousands of students, blue-collar factory workers, and young homemakers. Finally, this population encompasses punks, hippies, freaks, and myriad other types of *Aussteiger*—literally, those who have "stepped out" of mainstream bourgeois society. West Berlin is one of the main centers, as political scientist Walter Laqueur has said, of the "German psychoscene and [of an] alternative subculture."

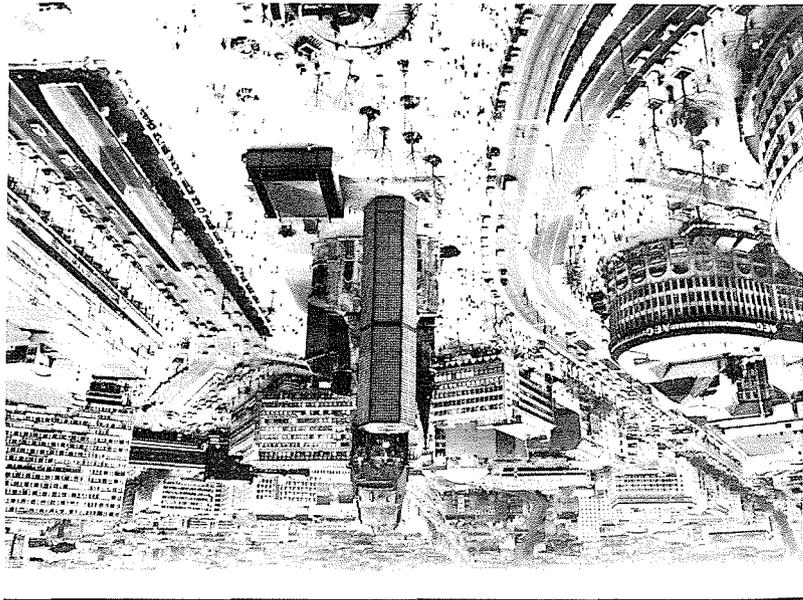
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If the *Berliner Szene*, as the inhabitants call this subculture, seems to loom unduly large, that should not be so surprising. The metropolis has long been described as fast paced and sharp edged, like Paris or New York. "A Berliner has no time," as the writer Kurt Tucholsky (1890–1935) once observed. "He is always busy, making telephone calls, arranging dates." Shepard Stone, director of the Aspen Institute in Berlin, who left Dartmouth to study at the University of Berlin in 1929, has written that, as always, "the city remains slightly mad, open to experiments, some promising, some absurd." Today, West Berlin may be the only city in the world that employs a "rock commissioner" to award grants to bands with names such as *Einstürzende Neubauten* ("Collapsing Structures").

What strikes many visitors to West Berlin is how much it differs from Frankfurt, Munich, Hamburg, and other large cities in the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG). Like those metropolises, West Berlin enjoyed its own *Wirtschaftswunder*, or "economic miracle," during the 1950s and '60s. Today, the Kurfürstendamm, the city's main thoroughfare, rivals Paris' Champs-Élysées in elegance and in the number of cafes and restaurants. Every day some 75,000 shoppers spend about \$600,000 at Kaufhaus des Westen, the city's famed six-story department store. Patrons can shop for everything from leather luggage, to fresh lion's meat, to 1,500 kinds of cheese.

But perhaps because West Berliners have lived through so much, or perhaps because of the invigorating "Berlin air," the economic miracle changed the city less than it did the FRG. "Two countries," the Swedish writer Lars Gustafsson has argued, "could not be more different than the scarred, clever Berlin, with its lively sharp intellect, with its revolu-

Josef Ernst, 31, is a writer and former WQ researcher, who now lives in West Berlin. Born in Norderney, West Germany, he received a B.A. from Southern Illinois University (1979), and an M.A. (1985) and a Ph.D. (1987) in political science from the Free University of Berlin. He is the author of The Structure of Political Communication in the United Kingdom, the United States, and the Federal Republic of Germany (1988).



West Berlin's gleaming Breitscheidplatz, with the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church at center. City fathers preserved the ruins of the old church so that residents would not forget how World War II devastated the city.

tionary groups, its Marxist day care centers... and the stupid, money-distended [Federal Republic] with its supermarkets, its portable TV sets, and its creaking pompous furniture."

West Berlin has changed in fundamental ways since it made headlines during the Cold War. Though it is an "enclave" sitting in the middle of Communist East Germany, most West Berliners do not think of their largely green, 185-square-mile metropolis in that way. Embracing nearly three times the area of Washington, D.C., the city is big enough for winter skiing (on *Teufelsberg*, or "Devil's Hill," built from wartime rubble), for summer skinnydipping at a secluded beach, for a three-hour boat ride down the Havel River. Little wonder that West Berliners do not pay much attention to the infamous Wall.

The images of the city as "an island of freedom" (John F. Kennedy), as "a bone in Russia's throat" (Nikita Khrushchev), or as "an abcess in the flesh of socialism" (Pablo Neruda) have faded. Now, West Berlin stands as a meeting place between East and West, in the middle of Central Europe. It was at midpoint on Berlin's Glienicke Bridge that, in February 1986, for example, the Soviets traded dissident Anatoly B. Shcharansky and three other "Western spies" with the Americans for five Warsaw Pact intelligence agents who had been caught in the West. That East Berlin and West Berlin coexist peacefully represents a

quiet victory for Western diplomats and Western stamina. Over the last 20 years, the Soviets and the Western allies (the United States, Britain, and France) have not resolved their disputes over the status of Berlin, but they have agreed to disagree. In the Western view, *all* of Berlin remains, as it has been since the end of World War II, under four-power administration. The Soviets, however, consider East Berlin the capital of East Germany (the German Democratic Republic or GDR) and West Berlin a separate entity. The Quadripartite Agreement, which all four allies negotiated in 1971, and signed the following year, papered over these differences. "The situation which has developed in the area," it says, in the vaguest possible terms, "... shall not be changed unilaterally." The accord also guaranteed the allies, West Berliners, and West Germans free access to the city.

NATO's Trip Wire

The task of Western diplomats working in West Berlin is to maintain the city's fragile status—a mission that sometimes puts them at loggerheads with the local government. Last year, for example, East German leader Erich Honecker invited Eberhard Diepgen, West Berlin's 47-year-old Christian Democratic mayor, to East Berlin to celebrate the city's 750th anniversary. Diepgen's eagerness to make the trip irked allied leaders, who saw in Honecker's invitation a shrewd maneuver to get the mayor to recognize East Berlin as the capital of the GDR. "If we acknowledge that East Berlin has become just another part of East Germany," said one U.S. official, "then what happens to our argument that West Berlin still has the same status as it did at the end of the war?"

In the end, the East German foreign ministry canceled the invitation. The government explained that, in criticizing the East German police, or *Vopos*, for the shooting of would-be escapees at the Wall, Diepgen had made "slandorous attacks" on the East German state.

The allies know that the 6,000 American, 3,000 British, and 2,700 French troops who are segregated in their barracks and training grounds could not long withstand a Warsaw Pact assault. At best, they could only serve as a "trip wire" for NATO retaliation. But they remain in the city to demonstrate the West's willingness to support democratic governments—even one that is surrounded by a Communist regime. Some allied actions—for instance, the expropriation of suburban farmland for firing ranges or military housing—have not endeared the troops to the natives. In an effort to improve relations, the allies have agreed to a *Rechtsbereinigung*, or a "cleaning up," of old laws that empowered the allies to prohibit the publication of newspapers, to require citizens to carry passports, to arrest Berliners for carrying pen knives, etc.

Some would like the allies to go further. "We want German courts and German laws," said Renate Künast, a prominent member of the Alternative Liste Party. "And we want the Western military presence

reduced to a symbolic one. There's no possibility of [the allies] defending Berlin anyway." Those who have opposed the allied occupation have done so peacefully. It was, after all, Arab terrorists, not West Berliners, who bombed the "La Belle" disco in April 1986, killing an American G.I. and a Turkish woman, and injuring 230 others. Opinion polls have indicated that some 80 percent of the locals favor the allied occupation. When U.S. G.I.'s and West Berliners do mingle, at nightclubs such as "Go In" or "La Belle," relations are usually cordial, and German-American scuffles are rare. West Berliners turn out in droves for the July 4 Allied Forces Day parade, air shows, and similar events.

Many of the younger folk, however, regard the parades, U.S. Army patrols along the Wall, and other military routines with a certain derision. At a youth hangout called the "Potsdamer Abkommen" ("Potsdam Agreement"), the condom dispenser at the back of the tavern is decorated with the U.S., British, and French flags—one for each brand. A sign above the machine reads: "Schutzmächte" ("protective powers").

Few West Berliners of any age joke about West Berlin's 254,000 foreign *Gastarbeiter*, or "guest workers," whose presence has created many (predictable) difficulties. The Turks, who account for almost half of all foreigners living in the city, began arriving in the late 1960s. Today, in Kreuzberg and other Turkish ghettos, dark-eyed children play soccer in the streets to the exotic sound of Turkish music, which wafts out of nearby bars. On Friday afternoons, hundreds of Turkish men, their heads topped with white *takkes*, may be seen genuflecting toward Mecca on the lawns of the city's 25 mosques.

The Magic Word

Most of West Berlin's other immigrants—Greeks, Sri Lankans, Lebanese—have arrived more recently, and by highly unorthodox means. Indeed, many of these immigrants were *delivered* to West Berlin by the East German government. Here is how the operation worked: In the immigrants' native lands, the East Germans advertised cheap flights to Berlin aboard *Interflug* airlines. Desperate for work, thousands of future *Gastarbeiter* bought tickets, and soon found themselves at Schönefeld Airport, just south of East Berlin.

From there, the *Vopos* put the immigrants on commuter trains bound for the Friedrichstrasse station in East Berlin. At Friedrichstrasse, the immigrants would board streetcars headed into West Berlin, where they would arrive two minutes later. Because the Western allies did not consider the Wall an international boundary, they could not require the "refugees" to clear customs. Once the immigrants said the magic word ("asylum") they became candidates for permanent residency in West Berlin or the FRG.

Under Western pressure, the East Germans agreed to stop importing and re-exporting the refugees in 1987—but not before they had